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Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation

# URBAN Archaeology

Washington State Archaeology 2005

Many objects recovered by the archaeologists were complete and intact, others could be mended from just a few pieces. This shows that families did not reuse these objects. Instead, they discarded them well before the end of their useful lives. Historians note that this behavior marked the first time in human history that the demand for new goods and new raw materials outweighed values of repair and re-use.

**U**rban Archaeology is the sub-discipline of archaeology specializing in the material culture of cities and urban centers. Everyday items such as buttons, tools, bottles and dishes are often recovered by archaeologists. These artifacts, and the information they contain, give us important insight into the daily lives and broader cultural patterns of our grandparents and great-grandparents.

One such urban archaeological site was found when the new Vancouver Conference Center was built on what had once been a residential neighborhood in the heart of Vancouver. When the site was excavated, archaeologists found more than 60 archaeological features including abandoned pit toilets filled with household goods dating from 1876 to 1915, as well as brick building foundations dating from the turn-of-the-century. In all, more than 50,000 artifacts were recovered during the project.

The late nineteenth century was a period of great change in the medical profession. A popular practice of the day was for the ill to take so-called "patent medicines". Commonly, these products contained alcohol or some type of narcotic that would suppress the symptoms of illness without treating the underlying causes. The producers of "patent medicines" saturated the market using a variety of advertising techniques to sell their products such as trading cards, calendars, atlases and storybooks. Most of these free items were given to customers to create brand awareness and loyalty. While these techniques may seem common today, they were innovative in the 1880s.

In addition to the utilitarian household items found, a variety of children's toys were also recovered, confirming the presence of families on the block. Playthings such as frozen "Charlotte" dolls, marbles, pieces of children's tea sets, toy guns, chalkboards and other items were all part of the archaeological record. Finding these toys allows archaeologists to understand more about the care and treatment of children in the past.

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